



SHARP News



STDs Still a Real Threat, Even at Home

The following article, based on an interview of Mr. William Calvert, SHARP Program Manager at NEHC, was written by Staff Sgt. Kathleen T. Rhem, USA, of the American Forces Press Service. The article appears on-line at:
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"WASHINGTON, May 31, 2000 -- Sexually transmitted diseases are a real threat to readiness, and service members and leaders need to do more to prevent their spread.

"A large percentage of the military population is sexually active young adults," said Bill Calvert, chairman of the DoD's STD Prevention Committee. "With 333 million new cases of STDs globally and 15.3 million new cases in the United States each year, our service members are certainly at risk for exposure to STDs."

Calvert said younger adults are at higher risk of being exposed to STDs, placing the military population at higher risk than the general public -- two to five times higher, according to the Navy Environmental Center, Norfolk, Va., in its recent paper on condom availability in the Navy and Marine Corps. "In time of military conflict the difference can be 50 times higher or more," the report said.

Calvert said service members routinely receive information about STD risks while serving overseas, but the subject is often overlooked in the United States.

"Service members need to be reminded there are risks here at home as well," he said. "I think we scare the daylights out of our service members in foreign ports and countries, but they think they're safe at home. Yet the U.S. has the highest rates of STDs among developed countries." Public health officials have estimated STD infection rates in the United States to be up to 100 times higher than in other industrialized nations.

Compounding the problem, Calvert said, new STDs are emerging, and existing ones are becoming resistant to current treatments. In Hawaii, where one-third of all reported cases of gonorrhea come from the active duty population, Army health officials recently reported several cases of STDs not responding to treatment.

While most STDs are treatable, infection with human immunodeficiency virus is life-threatening and directly impacts unit readiness. "HIV-infected service members are no longer deployable," Calvert said. "Replacing them with a new person who has not worked with the unit also hinders readiness."

But HIV isn't the only STD with long-term health consequences or impact on readiness. "Human papilloma virus has been associated with cervical cancer and other cancers. Even some curable STDs can have very serious side effects or permanent effects on reproduction," he said. "Other STDs certainly have emotional and economic consequences. The emotional consequences of somebody contracting an STD could impair their ability to do their job to the fullest."

Calvert also said many people are not aware that having an STD puts them at greater relative risk for contracting HIV. "Some STDs can cause lesions that provide openings for HIV infection," he said.

Experts agree the best way to treat disease is to prevent it, and STDs are no different. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta has said prevention is the most important strategy for controlling the spread of infectious disease, Calvert said.

To that end, he continued, the committee is working with the services to increase availability of male and female condoms, products that have been proven to protect against STDs. The committee also is working with the service exchange systems to encourage people to purchase disease-prevention products by keeping prices as low as possible.

"We're working with the medical community, health-promotion community, STD clinics, and even individual commands to purchase condoms as part of a comprehensive prevention program," Calvert said. That program, he said, includes education, and information on abstinence, monogamous relationships and reducing the number of sexual partners. "We'd like to provide condoms, much like we do hard-hats or earplugs, as protective equipment to keep our troops safe," he said.

While abstinence or sex with a mutually monogamous, uninfected partner are the surest ways to cut one's risk of STD infection, Calvert acknowledged that encouraging these practices won't eliminate STDs. "If people are engaging in sex, telling them to stop is not going to work. But using condoms helps," he said. "Rather than just saying, 'Use them,' we're trying to provide the support by making them easily available."

Providing condoms has been an emotionally charged issue, with much national debate on the subject as schools around the country consider doing so. Calvert said many studies have shown distributing condoms doesn't increase sexual activity, but it does cut down on disease transmission.

"I don't want to bring up a debate about promiscuity," Calvert said. "This is not high school or junior high school. We're dealing with adults, and adults have the right to choose. We sell alcohol, we sell tobacco, but we also educate about the dangers of alcohol and tobacco."

Recent DoD studies have shown that the vast majority of service members understand how HIV is spread, yet only 42 percent reported using condoms during their last sexual encounter. "There seems to be a disconnect between what they know and what they're doing," Calvert said of service members. Officials hope increasing condom availability will reverse this trend.

Calvert also said military culture makes people more susceptible to risky behavior, noting that risk-taking is a common thread among successful service members.

"We want young service members who are risk takers. They work hard and they play hard," he said. "We're talking about people who jump out of planes for a living. We're dealing with young adults, many of whom are away from home for the first time, and you can't put chastity belts on them."

He said the military likes its members to be "eight feet tall and bulletproof," and it's the leaders' challenge to temper that and teach them the risks of unsafe sex.

Related Site of Interest: Navy Environmental Health Center "Health Promotion" Web site:
<http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/>